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Book Review, In Pursuit of a Progressive Urban/ Metropolitan Policy

W Dennis Keating
Cleveland State University, w.keating@csuohio.edu

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Book Review

In Pursuit of a Progressive Urban/Metropolitan Policy

Review by W. Dennis
Keating

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Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the Twenty-First Century, by Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf and Todd Swanstrom. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2001. 334 pp.

This book represents another attempt to argue for a national urban policy, but this time the authors urge a “metropolitan” approach that will simultaneously address the needs of suburbs that are becoming increasingly diverse and facing many problems once associated solely with cities. The authors are three academics with excellent credentials for this undertaking: Peter Dreier (Director, Urban and Environmental Policy Program, Occidental College, political science), John Mollenkopf (Director, Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center, political science and sociology), and Todd Swanstrom (Saint Louis University, political science).

Their main concern is how to support our central cities and their poorer residents and neighborhoods in the face of longstanding currents against a national urban policy. The authors seek a political solution to the persistent division between suburbs, where a majority of the American population now resides, and the central cities which have steadily lost population and political clout.

In seeking to build a majority political coalition uniting the concerns of suburbanites and central city dwellers, the authors cite three “fundamental realities”: 1) outer metropolitan areas need healthy central cities; 2) the interests of inner suburbs are more closely aligned with central cities than with better-off outer suburbs; and 3) the problems of central cities and their suburbs are exacerbated by the political fragmentation and competition that now characterizes our metropolitan areas.

The greater part of the book recounts the problems of central cities and suburbs, their causes, and their costs. Efforts to reduce concentrated poverty under liberal regimes in Atlanta, Boston, and Detroit are reviewed and compared with the policies of conservative mayors in cities like Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and New York.

Regionalism, old and new, is examined in areas such as Hartford, Louisville, Memphis, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Portland, Oregon.

There follows a call for a federal metropolitan agenda and policy, which the authors argue could only happen through incentives, as opposed to top-down mandates. They cite the limited federal support for areawide planning as one precedent for this type of incentive, although the resulting organizations have rarely had the authority or consensus to address crucial and divisive issues. The authors propose numerous major policy changes – “at once radical and incremental” – to address the problems they identify: the deconcentration of poverty through metropolitan low- and moderate-income housing vouchers and subsidized housing, raising the federal minimum wage above the poverty level, universal health care and child care, elimination of inter-jurisdictional economic development competition through economic subsidies, and expansion of voting rights and protection for labor unions.

But the question arises: How can such a liberal and progressive agenda be adopted at the national level? Subsidized housing and voucher programs have encountered major resistance when tried in Maryland and New Jersey (under the court-ordered Mt. Laurel remedy) for example. As the authors later admit, combining smart growth and the deconcentration of poverty with affordable housing remains a major obstacle to promoting greater regional equity.

The major contribution of *Place Matters* is its proposal for tying suburban self-interest to metropolitan cooperation, especially around such issues as the financing of rapid growth, and smart-growth solutions to over-development. The authors also argue that the mounting problems of many older suburbs could lead them to join with central cities that have long experienced similar problems, forging cross-jurisdictional political coalitions. Three Congressional districts are examined for their potential to form these coalitions: the very liberal South Bronx in New York City, a working-class suburban swing district outside Cleveland, and a conservative suburban district outside Chicago. The authors urge a new political rhetoric and organizational agenda crossing city lines in metropolitan areas, and they cite reapportionment after the 2000 census as an opportunity to form more Congressional districts that could lead to the coalitions they advocate.

Although they concede that this metropolitan political transformation is not likely to happen in large urban areas because local politicians will oppose it as they have in the past, the authors nevertheless see the possibility of alliances between the corporate elite and labor unions, environmentalists, neighborhood organizations, churches, and other groups.

What gives this reviewer considerable pause in accepting their optimistic view is the fact that former President Bill Clinton's two majorities in the suburbs in the 1992 and 1996 national elections are touted as evidence of the feasibility of the formation of such a political coalition. In the 2000 election, George Bush edged out Al Gore in the suburbs. While Clinton wooed the suburban vote, once elected, he either dropped or downplayed the liberal part of his political agenda, both before and after the Republican takeover of the Congress in 1994. While his administration occasionally spotlighted some of the issues deemed critical by the authors, once political opposition arose, Clinton typically backed off or offered diluted programs. If this performance is analyzed as a "centrist" Clinton moving the liberal Democratic party nationally to the center of the political spectrum and playing to the interests of suburban voters – with occasional gestures made to the central cities and their poverty problems – this does not justify the authors' optimism for forging a progressive coalition featuring the suburbs.

Nevertheless, there are ongoing attempts at the local and state levels to pursue a metropolitan strategy, and these efforts are to be applauded. Few examples exist of the kind of metropolitan political coalitions proposed by the authors, who also recognize that for these coalitions to be effective there must be supportive federal policies. Despite these caveats, the emerging efforts detailed in *Place Matters* offer some promise for bridging the municipal divide.

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W. Dennis Keating is associate dean of the Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University.

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